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MANUEL GÁLVEZ, ARGENTINE NOVELIST

In Argentina during the last few years novels have been an important form of literature. Of the many novelists an outstanding name is that of Manuel Gálvez. Unlike most of the others he devotes his entire time to literature which he considers a serious art.

His first books consisted of verses, *El Enigma interior*, 1907, and *Sendero de humildad*, 1909. The former, as the title suggests, contained poems of a modernista type. It was poorly received by the reviewers. The second volume offered verses of an entirely different sort, realistic sketches of country life and of memories of childhood. In the preface to the second edition, 1920, the author says:—"Era mi libro una reacción contra el parisienismo dominante entonces, y representaba una orientación argentinista y española." During the decade between the two editions of *Sendero de humildad*, poetry in Argentina has become decidedly realistic in character.*

The centenary of Argentine independence in 1910, followed by labor troubles, focused the attention of Argentines on themselves. Introspection led to much discussion as to the emphasis which should be placed on the different elements of Argentine character, a complex based on the union of the aboriginal races with the first Spaniards coming to the Rio de la Plata, but continuously altered by fresh immigration, not only from Spain but also from the other countries of Europe, especially from Italy.

Gálvez directed his attention to the Spanish element. In 1912 he went to Spain and wrote interesting accounts of his travels which were published in part in Argentine periodicals. Collected in book form, they were published in a volume *El Solar de la Raza*, of which the title indicates the slant given to his observations. The book was dedicated to his Spanish ancestors and to Spain, "la España que es para nosotros, los argentinos, la casa solariega y blasonada que debemos amar." The author's purpose appears in the first chapter.

"Nuestra fuerte y bella patria argentina vive en una hora suprema: la hora en que sus mejores inteligencias y sus más sanos corazones reclaman la espiritualización de la conciencia nacional. . . El inmigrante vencedor mediante su éxito enorme en la adquisición de la fortuna, ha introducido en el país un nuevo concepto de la vida. . . No traía otro propósito sino enriquecerse, y era, pues, natural que contagiase a los argentinos su respeto exclusivo

*See article on *Recent Argentine Poets* in *HISPANIA*, Vol. V, No. 3, May, 1922.

de los valores materiales. . . Ahora nos falta introducir el agua de vida que es la espiritualidad. . . Debemos tomar las enseñanzas espiritualistas de España como un simple punto de partida, como un germen que, trasplantado al clima moral de nuestra patria, arraigará en ella con vigor nuevo y forma propia."

Having been misunderstood in some quarters, Gálvez explained in the preface to the fifth edition of the book:

"Se ha dicho, que, en mi admiracion hacia la España vieja, preconizo la resurrección del pasado, el retorno a modos de vivir, de sentir y de pensar, ajenos a nuestro tiempo. Nada menos exacto. Mi admiración hacia la España vieja es puramente artística y literaria. Del mismo modo que comprendo y siento lo que hay de bello en la vida moderna, comprendo y siento lo que tiene de bello el pasado; si he querido evocarlo, no es para que informe nuestra existencia actual ni para que nos sirva de modelo o de guía."

El Solar de la Raza is an exceedingly interesting book of travel in Spain written by a man who observes closely and writes entertainingly, qualities that mark his work as a novelist. The Argentine government presented the author with ten thousand pesos by way of stimulus to other writers to produce so good a book. About a year later in 1914, Gálvez published his first novel, *La Maestra normal*. In many respects this is one of his best and will always remain attractive because it depicts aspects of life in the interior of Argentina with realistic faithfulness.

The strength of *La Maestra normal*, as is the case with all Gálvez' novels, resides in the details and not in the plot. This is the commonplace one of seduction. Raselda, the romantic school teacher, was intended by nature for motherhood rather than for the schoolroom. She comes to the old city of La Rioja, situated on the slopes of the Andes, where life has not changed its character in a hundred years. She meets the different social circles of the town, the aristocratic daughters of an old family unable to find suitable husbands and thus condemned to a life of gossip and idleness as well as the women of the lower class that live in the suburbs, the "ranchería", which is one of the characteristic parts of every Argentine city. She becomes involved in the intrigues of the school where she teaches, herself the victim partly of her own incapacity as a teacher and partly of the ambition of another woman who wishes to turn out the principal of the school. As a refuge for her troubles she finds Solís, a young man who had ruined his health in dissipation in Buenos Aires and who had come to La Rioja to seek restoration of both health and fortune. Solís becomes the reader's guide through the intricacies of masculine society, the group of older men that nightly discuss politics in the drugstore on the plaza, the

younger hotheads that plot revolution in the cafe and the still younger men who frequent questionable dances in the ranchería. Some interesting pages are devoted to the description of New Year's Day as celebrated by the Indian population of the town, a curious mingling of Christianity and paganism.

"Los indios cantaban al son monótono del tamborcito:

Año nuevo pacarí
Niño Jesús Cancharí
Tintillalli llallincho,
Corollalli llallincho.

Era un canto doloroso, evocador, bárbaro, pleno de carácter. El tamborcito marcaba el ritmo y las voces entonaban la melodía. El Inca empezaba el canto con su voz gangosa y rota; los demás coreaban.

Solís se había reconcentrado. Aquella música doliente, toda quejumbre y resignación, estaba impregnada de un hondo fatalismo. La amarga tristeza de las razas vencidas penetraba en su alma. . . ¡Ah, era preciso que todos los argentinos fuesen una sola raza, que precedieran de un origen común! De otro modo, ¿cómo podía emocionarle a él aquella pobre musiquita? Había algo en la tonada de los indios que venía desde el fondo de los siglos pretéritos, desde lo más profundo de la raza. Sí; eran todos los argentinos hermanos de estos hombres, hijos, como ellos, de estas mismas tierras indianas."

Gálvez' next novel, *El Mal metafísico*, is a sad book. In following the fortunes of a poet, Carlos Riga, the reader is taken through the good and bad of Bohemian life in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires. Some of the group of friends succeed; but Carlos Riga is too weak willed to persevere in his plans. Toward the end, in summing up his life and describing his present state, the author says: "Y para olvidar, no conocía otro recurso que el alcohol. Vivía de pequeños préstamos que le hicieron algunos camaradas, de cobrar algunos versos que le debían ciertas revistas; y todos aquellos centavos se convertían en alcohol, engañaban sus penurias, atenuaban sus sufrimientos." After three hundred and forty pages of what might serve as good propaganda against strong drink, the poet is buried.

In this novel appear two personages, José Alberto Flores and Nacha who are the protagonists of Gálvez' subsequent books, *La Sombra del convento* and *Nacha Regules*. The novelist's ambition was to produce psychological studies of character; but, in both, his facility in descriptive detail outruns his skill in psychological analysis.

La Sombra del convento is, however, a masterpiece; not for its success in what probably was the author's main intention, the development of José Alberto's character, but for presenting to the

reader a vivid picture of the physical aspect of Córdoba and a clear view of the state of mind of a whole section of its leading citizens.

The writer of this article can personally testify regarding the matter. After spending many days in Córdoba, photographing its picturesque sites, both in the city and in the environs, he came upon a copy of the novel in Buenos Aires. It was like a guide book for fidelity and made him regret that he lacked a copy of the novel during many walks and excursions. José Alberto has returned to his native city after an absence of ten years, largely spent in idleness in Europe. To distract his mind he revisits the scenes of his childhood and youth, sometimes at night to quiet his insomnia. Argentine critics have called the description in the book prolix and even tedious; but they do not seem so to the writer.

The peculiarity of Córdoba resides in the fact that it is the seat of a national university, founded in the year 1613, as a Jesuit college, which has left a deep impression upon the population. On the one hand the city is full of churches and convents with a religious conduct of life among that people that belongs in spirit to a past age. The upper classes and old families form an intellectual aristocracy with traditions that are out of harmony with modern life. The leading daily paper of the city is the organ of this conservative class. Its prejudices, its habits and its reactions to events, Gálvez has set forth in a masterful manner by taking for his plot the courtship by the liberal minded José Alberto Flores of Teresa Belderrain, daughter of a sternly religious father. And he has not overlooked the other members of the family in their conflict with modern ideas. Take, for example, the following graphic picture of home life:

"Los Belderrain se disponían a sentarse a la mesa. Ya habían llegado la señora, el doctor y las tres hijas mujeres; y todos aguardaban de pie, frente a sus sillas, a que vinieran las demás personas de la familia. No tardó en presentarse Ignacio, el hijo mayor, que aquella noche se quedaba a comer en casa de sus padres.

Un lugar continuaba aún vacío; pero nadie se atrevía a mirarlo. Un malestar bien perceptible circulaba en aquel comedor. El doctor Belderrain, con el ceño adusto, los brazos cruzados y apretados con fuerza, tenía los ojos clavados en el mantel. Nadie hablaba una palabra, no se oía el menor ruido, y todos seguían esperando de pie la llegada del que faltaba. La señora, con el rostro inclinada, mostraba un triste aspecto de sumisión y de pena. Las muchachas habían adoptado un aire grave. Por fin, al cabo de unos minutos, el doctor Belderrain movió sus pequeños ojos nerviosos, buscando a la sirvienta. La pobre muchacha, que estaba en el umbral de la puerta no atreviéndose a entrar, tartamudeó, temerosa y como si fuera culpable:

—El niño Francisco Javier no está en la casa.

Belderrain, ásperamente, exclamó:

—¿Por qué no entra? Acérquese.

La criollita, temblando, se acercó, y entonces el doctor, señalando con el brazo rígido y extendido el lugar vacío, ordenó:

—Saque ese cubierto y no vuelva a ponerlo nunca.

La señora levantó los ojos hacia su marido como rogando; pero al encontrarse con la mirada conminatoria y dura de Belderrain, bajó la cabeza dolorosamente. Mientras tanto, todos se ponían en actitud de recogimiento. El doctor Belderrain se persignó, su mujer y sus hijas hicieron lo mismo, y en seguida se sentaron a la mesa, sin hacer casi ruido. La muchacha empezó a servir.

The missing person was the youngest son, who was thus formally expelled from the family because without his father's consent he had gone to Buenos Aires, a city which in the doctor's opinion deserved the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah. He had been a member of the Argentine Congress when it adopted the law permitting divorce. In consequence he had resigned and since that date, no newspaper from the city had been admitted to his house, where none was read except the Catholic daily published in Córdoba. The man's loyalty to the Jesuits is emphasized by the names of his children, to whom he is extremely harsh. To the three unmarried daughters he used to say: "No hablen de novios; hablen de santos." Naturally José Alberto's suit of Teresa runs into difficulties. One night a priest hears him speak lightly of religion. Word is taken to Belderrain that José Alberto is an unbeliever and Teresa, after a stormy interview with her father, is clapped into a convent. The shadow of the convent having thus descended on José Alberto's love affair, he rages against the Jesuits publicly, thus increasing his sins in the opinion of Belderrain. Only by conversion to religion is José Alberto able to get Teresa out of the convent. Hostile critics of the novel question the sincerity of such a conversion. Anyhow, the stern father is satisfied and dies begging the pardon of the young couple with whose happiness he had interfered.

The contrast between the traditional in Córdoba, "la docta ciudad," and the liberalism of the young is cleverly brought out in the chapter in which José Alberto makes his declaration of love to Teresa. The eighth of December, being the festival of the Immaculate Conception, a doctrine especially dear to the Jesuits, is the day when degrees are conferred at the university, the "casa de Trejo," as the students have irreverently nicknamed it after the founder.

"No había en Córdoba otra ceremonia más solemne. Todos los años la ciudad esperaba ansiosamente aquel día que parecía justificar ante el mundo

la condición de docta con que ella se juzgaba a sí misma. En cada antigua familia era aquella una fiesta propia. ¡Como que desde los viejos tiempos en que el obispo Trejo fundará la Universidad Magna de San Carlos, no había apeilido de tradición que no aumentase sus blasones, año por año, con un nuevo título doctoral!

José Alberto había presenciado varias veces aquella fiesta. Pero esta vez tenía nuevos atractivos para él. Ante todo, sabía que iba a encontrarse con Teresa y que allí le sería fácil hacer que sus palabras y sus ojos revelasen lo que ya no cabía en su corazón. Además iba a hablar Ignacio, quien le anunciara y le recomendara su discurso.

José Alberto paseaba sus ojos por el gentío que desbordaba del claustro, y se asombraba de no conocer a nadie. La concurrencia era casi toda gente joven: mocitos y niñas, que tomaban la grave ceremonia como simple reunión social. Habían convertido a la austera y docta casa de Trejo, que tuvo como primeros profesores a los padres de la Compañía, en lugar amable, donde la juventud se sentaba alegremente alrededor de triviales mesitas que afrentaban con su olor a confitería y a kermesse, la soledad pensativo del viejo claustro. En el jardín, rodeado por una alta verja cerrada, se apiñaban aquellas mesas donde los jóvenes, flirteando, se disponían a gustar helados y palabritas amorosas en lugar de discursos académicos. Hasta la estatua del obispo Trejo se hallaba circundada de mesitas. Era una adominación."

When Doña Dolores and her three daughters, Lolita, Teresa and Asunción arrive, José Alberto joins them. Asunción refuses to go into the hall of ceremonies, though her brother is the orator of the occasion.

"—Va a hablar Ignacio, es un deber, es un deber—repetía Lolita, indignada, no tanto por la negativa de Asunción, en sí misma, sino por sospechar que su hermanita quería ir al jardín o a los altos para flirtear cómodamente.

Doña Dolores, aflijida y temerosa, no osaba hablar. Pero como ella no podía dejar de oír a su hijo, pues a eso solamente había ido, ni tampoco podía andar paseando por los claustros como las muchachas, entró seguida de Lolita, que escuchaba a su hermana menor miradas apocalípticas. Asunción, apenas notó que su madre y Lolita no podían retroceder, tomó de un brazo a Teresa—¡capaz de querer entrar!—y la llevó al jardín. José Alberto siguió a las dos primas del lado de Teresa, que estaba encarnada por la acción, detestable, según ella, que habían cometido.

—¡Si encontráramos alguna mesita!—exclamó Asunción, con gran alarma de Teresa.

Entraron en el jardín. Y después de buscar un breve instante, encontraron una mesa pequeña, como para dos personas, donde se hallaba un cortejante de Asunción, que reservaba el sitio para ambos. La mesita quedaba bajo la estatua del obispo Trejo, del lado de la puerta del salón de actos. El cortejante de Asunción trajo dos sillas más, y los cuatro se sentaron.

La ceremonia debía haber comenzado, porque las gentes, agrupadas a la puerta, siseaban a los del patio y de la galería para que callasen. El primer

discurso era el del rector; luego venía el del nuevo abogado, y, por fin, el de Ignacio, en representación del claustro de profesores y del cuerpo académico.

—Sis. . . ; Silencio!—gritó una voz colérica.

En el jardín algunos dejaron de hablar, pero en cambio hacían ruido con las cucharitas al revolver el azúcar en las tazas o tomar los helados. José Alberto y Teresa fueron de los primeros en callar. Pero el silencio, lejos de perjudicarles, les fué, paternal y cómplice, harto propicio. No pudiendo hablar se miraban, y con los ojos se decían un mundo de cosas. José Alberto tenía miradas audaces, que, cargadas de amor y de promesas, llegaban hasta lo más hondo del corazón de su prima. Pero ella, vergonzosa y tímida, apenas se atrevía a poner los ojos en él. Bajaba la vista y se dejaba mirar, sintiendo en sus mejillas ruborizadas posarse como un beso la fuerte mirada masculina.

De pronto, Asunción comenzó a reírse. Reía como si la hicieran cosquillas, y no tardó en ahogarse. José Alberto miraba hacia todos lados buscando el motivo de tan intempestivo reír.

—¡ Asunción! Te están mirando—decía Teresa.

—¿ Qué es lo que hay, Asunción? ¿ Qué pasa?—preguntaban José Alberto y el festejante.

—Soy de lo más tentada—dijo Asunción, tratando de ponerse seria.

Pero en seguida estalló de nuevo. Interrogada, acabó por declarar que se reía de imaginarse la rabieta que estaría pasando Lolita.

En este momento llegó del salón rumor de aplausos monótonos, académicos, acompasados: los aplausos rituales y fríos que el público solía agregar a las frases finales del rector. La gente se agolpó a la puerta, y, en seguida, nuevas oleadas invadieron la galería. Asunción se fué con su amigo; Teresa se había opuesto; no por Asunción, pues todas lo hacían, sino por temor de quedarse sola con su prima. Pero no se atrevió a decir nada, y apenas si denunció sus temores un grado de rubor más.

Quedaron solos Teresa y José Alberto."

José Alberto takes advantage of the opportunity to declare his love to Teresa. Their conversation is interrupted by the applause which greets Ignacio's speech, inveighing against modern science. They go and stand where they can listen. When he finishes:

"José Alberto y Teresa se vieron empujados por la gente que buscaba el patio para desahogar la sofocación y el entusiasmo. Los académicos abrazaban a Ignacio. Misia Dolores y Lolita venían hacia la puerta, para esperar a Ignacio, a quien en ese momento su padre le daba un beso en la frente. Se reunieron los cuatro. Misia Dolores estaba conmovida por aquella fe de su hijo y aquel éxito clamoroso, y Lolita parecía orgullosa de aquel hermano que no transigía con el mundo.

—¿ Y Asunción?—preguntó Lolita, volviendo a su rostro habitual.—¿ Dónde está? ¿ Cómo la dejaste sola?

—Asunción debe estar con. . .

Un gran murmullo que venía del claustro le cortó la palabra. Algunos hombres corrieron. José Alberto se asomó a la puerta. Era una discusión

violenta promovida por el discurso de Ignacio. Un minúsculo grupo de liberales había protestado en voz alta contra las ideas del orador. Las consideraban una vergüenza para la Universidad, una ignominia. Uno de ellos se había trezado en discusión con dos admiradores de Ignacio. Se oían, en el tumulto, algunas palabras: ultramontano, anarquista, frailón, enemigo de la sociedad. La gente se había arremolinado, y los liberales, vencidos por el número, se retiraron iracundos y superiores."

As a matter of history, in 1918, within a year of the time when Gálvez wrote these words, the students at the University of Córdoba went on strike demanding the modernization of their studies and the secularization of the control of the University. The turmoil, lasting several months, was marked by some incidents. One night the students tied a rope around the neck of Bishop Trejo's statue and with the help of an automobile succeeded in pulling the heavy bronze from the pedestal, toppling it over on its side. On another occasion, about seventy-five students barricaded themselves inside the University building where they remained several days before they were dislodged by troops. Finally the authorities in Buenos Aires intervened and the students' demands were granted.

The year 1919 was occupied by Gálvez in writing his next novel, *Nacha Regules*, which has proved the best seller of them all, perhaps because its theme, the redemption of a woman by love, attracted the public in Buenos Aires. Nacha is the woman who attempted the rehabilitation of the drunken poet in *El Mal metafísico*. In this story of her subsequent life, she attracts the attention of Monsalvat. He is a man with some property, a lawyer by profession, who has read many books on sociology. Witnessing the brutal dispersal of a socialist procession whereby the police leave some dead and many hurt, he inclines to rebellion against the social system. At an evening party when one of the guests voices his approval of the shooting, Monsalvat is unable to withstrain his indignation. After addressing some remarks to the company, he says to the lady beside him:

"Yo no sé cómo todo ese mundo de abajo no ha venido todavía a exterminarnos, a degollarnos en masa. Es la justicia que merecemos. Viene con lentitud, señora, pero ya llegará. Vaya preparando usted un lindo escote para ese día. Donde ahora siente el calorito de las perlas, sentirá el filo de un sable."

During the excitement caused by his talk, Monsalvat departs. He devotes his time to practicing what he has been preaching. The property that gave him his income consisted of a tenement house, one of the dreadful kind in Buenos Aires which the people call a

"conventillo," where, according to Monsalvat, ten human beings live in one room. He mortgages the tenement with the intention of remodeling it into a modern apartment house for the same tenants. He meets their opposition since they cannot understand his purpose. He proposes marriage to Nacha, partly because he thinks he is in love with her and partly because he believes that he is expiating some part of the evil that men have done to women. She is too decent to accept his offer and avoids him, though he hunts for her through all the evil resorts in the city. One of his friends finally finds her working in one of the large department stores, leading a respectable life for his sake. She loses her place because she breaks a manikin which she has been ordered to carry up several flights of stairs. The burden had been too great for her strength and she had fainted and fallen. While she lay on the floor, a superintendent stood over her with a watch in order to deduct the time from her pay, a warning of course to the other clerks. Monsalvat continues his social service by giving lessons to illiterate workmen. Finally he suffers a nervous breakdown after a complete loss of his property and the kidnaping of Nacha by a former lover and his gang of "compradritos," Buenos Aires toughs. He is taken to a sanitarium by his friends.

After she escapes, she finds Montsalvat by accident, just before the man suffers the loss of his sense of sight. She had inherited her mother's boarding house which gave her a living. When Montsalvat is totally blind, she tries first to find a specialist who can restore his vision. When that hope proves vain, she offers a final solution of the problem in these words:

—Una vez . . . más de un año . . . me pediste . . . una cosa. Yo entonces me negué. Me negué . . . queriéndote en el alma . . . para no inutilizarte la vida. Lo diste todo por mí . . . lo perdiste todo por mí. Ahora, yo puedo pedirte aquello mismo.

Calló. Instantáneamente vió lo que era Monsalvat: un hombre enfermo, ciego, que nunca podría trabajar lo suficiente para vivir con holgura; un hombre solo, sin nadie en el mundo; un hombre sin más porvenir que su tristeza y su noche. Pero entornó los ojos y continuó:

—Ahora . . . yo quiero . . . que te cases conmigo.

An epilogue consigns Monsalvat and Nacha to the oblivion of a third rate boarding house, whose atmosphere is purified by the spirituality and social enthusiasm of the blind man. May their good work continue; and their author leave them in oblivion!

Yet the novelist ought to reckon Monsalvat as his most successful creation. From his preface it is clear that Gálvez desires to be

counted among the psychological novelists, portraying character rather than narrating events. Monsalvat's point of view regarding society gives his character unity because he clings to it, though it brings him by degrees to ruin. He is conscious too of his downfall. Summoned by the police to report to them about a certain matter, instead of being interviewed privately, Monsalvat recognizes that he has become a social outcast. Still he clings to his determination and acts consistently. The reader feels that the portrayal of Monsalvat brings him close to reality; so close, in fact, that some have paid Gálvez the compliment of ascribing to him Monsalvat's social ideas, a notion that the novelist denies.

Gálvez' latest novel, *La Tragedia de un hombre fuerte*, lacks unity. The author feels the defect, for in his preface he speaks of "este libro—que no es precisamente una novela". One of the characters is Asunción, youngest daughter of Doctor Belderrain, who appears as the wife of Victor Urgel. Having developed the traditional piety of her family, her husband has lost interest in her, because he is a modern man, "ayanquizado", at outs with the traditional. The first chapter, describing his maiden speech as a congressman setting forth his views on Argentina's position in the world war and attempting to take a personal stand independent of all parties, is the best in the book. The conflict with his wife, however, which might have been the whole story, is only a very minor part of it. The tragedy of the strong man is that, despite his energy, he has a "romantic" streak in his character. He needs the support of a woman, but is unable to find it among the four to whom he makes love, nor in the fifth, his wife. But we need take no more interest in him than the author takes. He is merely a foil to bring out different female temperaments as we are told in a confidential preface.

"He querido encerrar en este libro—que no es precisamente una novela—un momento de la transformación espiritual de nuestro país. Me ha parecido que esta transformación se revela, más que en ninguna parte, en las actuales ideas morales sobre el amor y en las costumbres que con él se relacionan más o menos directamente. He realizado una larga y difícil encuesta para llegar al dominio del tema, documentándome con la misma seriedad con que lo hice siempre. . . . Nada dejé a la casualidad. Así, el personaje central ha debido ser provinciano para sentir agudamente el conflicto entre lo estático de las provincias y lo dinámico de Buenos Aires. Debí ser casado—con lo cual no ignoro que le quito simpatías entre mis lectoras—para que resaltase la valentía y decisión audaz de alguna de las mujeres que le amaron. Y he debido hacerle

un hombre de acción para que encarnara un prototipo de argentino moderno, ayanquizado por una parte, y, por otra, un tanto romántico."

The reader lays down the novel unconvinced that he has been reading anything specifically Argentine. The female characters are general types of passion, like some of Mathilde Sarao's; persons constructed by the cerebral activity of the author rather than observed from life.

A novel depicting the conflict into which a woman with the traditional Argentine education is thrust when she comes into contact with the rush of modern life is yet to be written. The part devoted to the traditional would be the most interesting section of the book. Well done, it would become as classic as Sarmiento's *Recuerdos de Provincia*. Gálvez has the talent to write such a novel.

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